

A Suitcase Full of Hope and a Heart Full of Service

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In 2013, my parents and I left Nepal with nothing but \$100 and a suitcase full of hope.

They traded the only life they had ever known for the uncertain promise of a brighter future for me. My father, the son of a teacher and a professor himself, soon found himself behind the counter of a convenience store in Delaware, working long hours under fluorescent lights just to keep food on the table. My mother, who grew up surrounded by comfort, tradition, and the gentle rhythm of her small Nepali town, suddenly faced the jarring reality of living in the lowest income bracket in the richest country in the world. Gone were the home-cooked meals shared with extended family, the warm greetings from familiar neighbors, and the steady certainty of a life built over decades. In their place were unfamiliar streets, language barriers, and nights spent counting every dollar and praying it would be enough.

Growing up in Middletown, Delaware, I watched my parents silently carry the weight of sacrifice, just so I could pursue an education and a life of meaning. Their struggles became my fuel. I vowed to make their journey worth it. But as a young immigrant girl caught between two cultures, I often felt invisible: too Nepali for the American kids, too American for the Nepali aunties.

My turning point came in high school, when I began volunteering at the local Nepali school as a teacher. Every Sunday, I stood before classrooms filled with children who, like me, were straddling two worlds. Many, including my younger brother, were slowly losing touch with their heritage. Their parents spoke Nepali, but they answered in English. They celebrated Dashain and Tihar at home, but didn't know the stories behind them.

I decided to change that.

I helped organize a Secret Santa activity, where children exchanged gifts in a way that blended Nepali and American traditions. I shared photos from my visits to Nepal, showing them the beauty of the temples in Bhaktapur, the snow-capped Himalayas, and the warm spirit of our people. I even led a class entirely on my own, helping students rediscover pride in their roots through stories, songs, and games. The kids smiled wider. Their parents said "thank you" more often. And I started to feel like I belonged—not just in the classroom, but in the community.

Dancing, which I had always loved, became another bridge. At a Nepali New Year celebration, I performed in front of the governor-elect, Matt Meyer, who later presented our dance group with an award for fostering cultural ties. For the first time, I didn't feel like I had to choose between being Nepali and being American. I could be both—fully and unapologetically.

Then, I learned that culture could do more than connect people—it could save them.

In April 2024, the Delaware Nepali Society (DNS) hosted its annual blood drive at Glasgow Regional Park. I helped promote the event through community groups and social media, but I didn't fully realize its impact until I stood there, watching dozens of people—young, old, first-timers, regulars—roll up their sleeves and donate. Amid a critical blood shortage declared by the Blood Bank of Delmarva, our small community rose up in a big way.¹

Dr. Santosh Kadel, the blood drive coordinator and a clinical architect at ChristianaCare, shared the stakes. Emergency medical responders were now equipped to transfuse whole blood

on the scene—at car accidents, during shootings—before victims reached the hospital. “In the first six months,” Governor Matt Meyer told us, “26 people received blood—26 people who may not be alive today had they not received it.”

One of those donors was my dad. The same man who once worked 14-hour shifts to support us was now honored for donating blood 28 times—an award Meyer handed to him in front of our entire community. The moment brought tears to my eyes. His act of kindness, one of so many over the years, was now saving strangers. This was public health in action—not in a lab or lecture hall, but in a park full of people who looked like me.

Among the donors was Ashish Dahal, a first-timer from Middletown, who told the local paper, “It’s not just for you, you’re saving the world.” That line stuck with me. It reminded me that public health isn’t just about vaccines and hospitals, it’s about communities taking care of each other.

The success of the blood drive wasn’t just in the number of donors. It was in how we blended cultural tradition with civic responsibility. We danced. We celebrated Nepali New Year. We spoke both English and Nepali. And we saved lives.

That experience inspired me to think more deeply about *health equity*. In many ways, my family’s journey mirrors the disparities immigrants often face. My parents didn’t know where to go for affordable healthcare. Language barriers kept them from asking the right questions.

Cultural stigma made it hard to talk about mental health. But through community events like the blood drive, we found strength—not in systems, but in *each other*.

Now, as the founder of STEM & Seniors, I lead workshops on digital literacy and AI awareness at senior centers across Delaware, often bringing public health into the conversation. I’ve learned that public health isn’t just about medicine: it’s about empowerment. It’s about giving people the tools to make informed decisions, whether that’s reading a blood pressure monitor, understanding a medical bill, or knowing when and how to donate blood.

The journey from a suitcase of hope to a statewide impact wasn’t linear, but it was meaningful. Through each step, I’ve learned that *public health begins with people*. With every child I taught Nepali to, every senior I helped navigate their phone, and every blood donor I cheered for, I saw a ripple of change.

And I know now that I don’t just carry my parents’ dreams, but that I carry a responsibility to uplift others. That’s what public health means to me.

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References

1. Blood Bank of Delmarva. (2024, April). Delaware Nepali Society blood drive brings in nearly 40 donors during blood emergency. <https://www.delmarvablood.org/news-events/delaware-nepali-society-blood-drive-brings-in-nearly-40-donors-during-blood-emergency/>

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